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THE
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Prudens futuri temporis exitum

Caliginosâ nocte premit Deus,

Ridetque, si mortalis ultra

Fas trepidat.

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It is not easy for the mind of man to recover itself from any extraordinary panic which has once seized it : for this reason we cannot be surpris'd, that many well-meaning people, who have not yet shook off the apprehensions occasioned by the late dreadful earthquakes, should be led to conjure up new terrors, and alarm themselves with imaginary dangers. Their fears interpret every common incident, and even the change of weather, as signs of approaching destruction : if the day be calm and serene, such (they say) is the usual fore-runner of a shock ; or if the

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night prove tempestuous, they can hardly persuade themselves that it is only the wind which rocks their houses. With this propensity to entertain any unreasonable dread about future events, it is no wonder, that weak minds should be further worked upon by little dabblers in philosophy; who having gleaned a few barren scraps from the Magazines, presume even to foretell the dissolution of the world by the Comet which will appear in 1758. *Swift*, in his *Voyage to Laputa*, has a passage so very apposite to these idle pretenders to science, that I shall beg leave to transcribe it.

“ THESE people (says he) are under continual disquietudes, never enjoying a minute’s peace of mind; and their disturbances proceed from causes, which very little affect the rest of mortals. Their apprehensions arise from several changes they dread in the celestial bodies. For instance, that the earth by the continual approaches of the sun towards it must in course of time be absorbed, or swallowed up. That the face of the sun will by degrees be encrusted with its own effluvia, and give no more light to the world. That the earth very narrowly escaped a brush from the last comet, which would have infallibly reduced it to ashes; and that the next, which they have calculated for one and thirty years hence, will probably destroy us. For, if in its perihelion it should approach within a certain degree of the sun (as by their calculations they have reasons to dread) it will receive a degree of heat ten thousand times more intense, than that of red hot glowing iron; and, in its absence from the sun carry a blazing tail ten hundred thousand and fourteen miles long; through which if the earth should pass at the distance of one hundred thousand miles from the *nucleus*, or main body of
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“ the comet, it must in its passage be set on fire, and reduced to ashes. That the sun, daily spending its rays without any nutriment to supply them, will at last be wholly consumed and annihilated ; which must be attended with the destruction of this earth and of all the planets that receive their light from it.

“ THEY are so perpetually alarmed with the apprehensions of these, and the like impending dangers, that they can neither sleep quietly in their beds, nor have any relish for the common pleasures or amusements of life. When they meet an acquaintance in the morning, the first question is about the sun’s health, how he looked at his setting and rising, and what hopes they have to avoid the stroke of an approaching comet. This conversation they are apt to run into with the same temper, that boys discover to hear terrible stories of spirits and hobgoblins, which they greedily listen to, and dare not go to bed for fear.”

LET us therefore banish from our thoughts all such vain notions, and let us fortify our minds with a true sense of religion, which will teach us to rely on the protection of that providence, which has hitherto preserved us. It is with great pleasure, that I remarked the unanimous concurrence of all ranks of people, in observing the late solemn Fast, as a necessary act of humiliation, to avert the wrath and vengeance of heaven, and to call down its mercies upon us : nor do I doubt, but the approaching Season will awaken in us the same serious attention to our duty ; that we may not seem to have barely complied with a stated form, or to have been affected with the short-lived piety of a single day.

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IT is true, indeed, that no persons do more prejudice to the cause of religion, than they who cloud its genuine chearfulness with the gloom of superstition, and are apt to consider every common accident that befalls us, as a judgment. They cloath religion in the most terrifying habit, and (as it were, dress it up in all the horrors of the Inquisition. These people are much to be pitied ; and it is to be wished, that their mistaken piety could be better regulated. But there is another set of men of a different turn, more numerous and much more dangerous to the community, who treat every act of religion as a jest, and hold its most sacred ordinances in contempt. Set forms and ceremonies, though they have no essential virtue in themselves, are yet indispensably requisite to keep alive in us a quick sense of our duty. It must be allowed, indeed, that if a man could constantly employ his mind in holy meditations, exercise the virtues, and believe the mysteries of our religion, he would be a true Christian, though he never complied with any outward forms, or so much as repeated a single prayer. But it is manifest from experience, that those who neglect the ordinances, neglect also the duties of a Christian ; and the least reflection on the human mind will convince us, that some external rites are necessary to settle the wandering ideas, and to fix the attention on its proper object. The fervent repetition of a prayer is apt to inspire us with love and gratitude towards the DEITY, and kindles the sparks of devotion within us : and it is easy to conceive, that if the celebration of public worship was neglected among us only for one year, it would be a more fatal blow to religion than all the weak attacks of infidels and free-thinkers. No arguments, therefore, could be more ill-grounded than the objection

jections of those people, who considered the appointment of the late solemn fast as useless and unnecessary.

BUT though forms may be said to compose the body, a good life is the soul of religion, without which the rest is but a dead mass. The most rigid compliance with every ordinance of the Church, if it has no influence on our conduct, is rather a solemn mockery than an atonement for our offences: as they, who receive the bread and wine without a firm resolution to lead a new life, are said to eat and drink their own damnation: Wherefore, a strict observance of this or that particular day is not a sufficient discharge of our duty, except it serve to rouse us from the lethargy of sin, to awaken in us a desire of becoming worthy the protection of the ALMIGHTY, by animating our faith, amending our lives, and working in us a repentance of our transgressions. Thus the Lord's Day is not merely set apart for devotion, with an unlimited licence to wickedness all the rest of the week; but our being particularly exercised in acts of piety for one day, is calculated to strengthen our virtue, and to give a tincture of religion to our whole conduct through the other six.

THESE considerations I have thought fit to lay before the reader, as preparatory to another solemn Fast ordained by the Church: and if the observance of this should be neglected or slightly passed over, may we not conclude, that our sense of religion is only in proportion to our sense of danger? As for those, who require constantly to be frightened into their duty, I will for once venture to commence prophet: and let them be assured that my predictions will infallibly come to pass. There is a danger, more certain than an

Earthquake or a Comet, which will inevitably overwhelm us; from which we cannot possibly guard ourselves, and which perhaps is even now at our doors. This danger I cannot better set forth, than in the alarming words of a celebrated *French* preacher. "I know a man (and I will point him out presently) who is now in this church; a man, in perfect health; a man, in the flower of his age: And yet this man, perhaps before next Sunday, perhaps by to-morrow, will be in his grave. This man, my dear brethren, is Myself who speak to you, it is You who hear me."

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